

If my people will humble themselves  
and pray and seek my face and  
turn from their wicked ways,  
then will I hear from  
heaven and will  
forgive their  
sin and will  
heal their land.

2 Chronicles 7:14

# Congressional Day of Prayer and Reconciliation

December 4, 2001

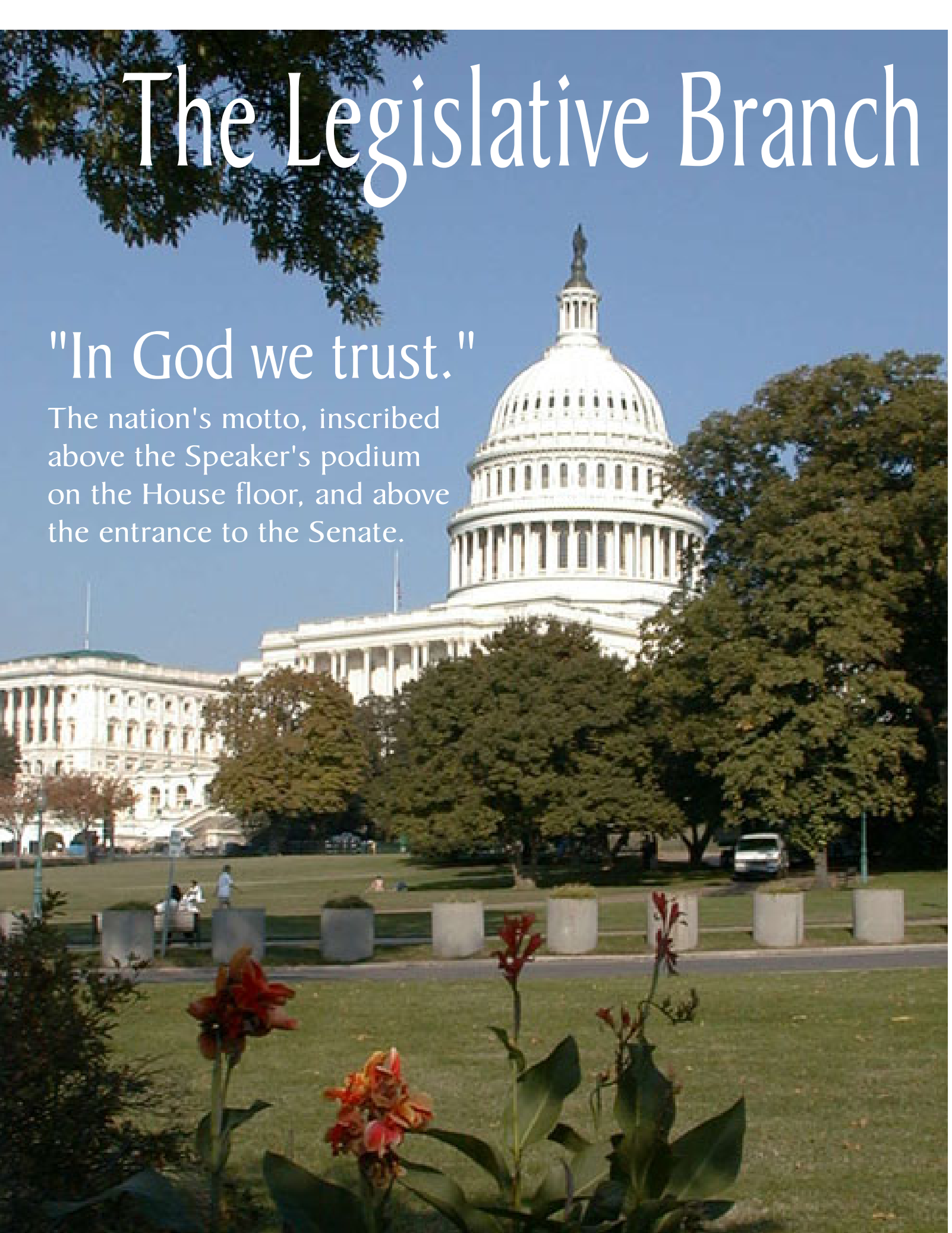


Prepared by  
Congressman Joe Pitts (PA-16)

# The Legislative Branch

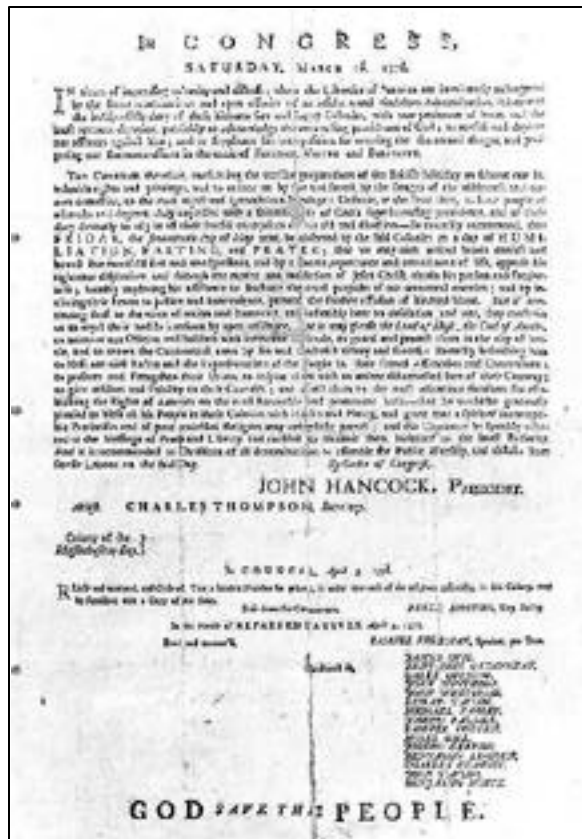
"In God we trust."

The nation's motto, inscribed above the Speaker's podium on the House floor, and above the entrance to the Senate.



# Prayer in the Legislative Branch

Since the First Continental Congress opened in 1774 with two-and-a-half hours of prayer, appeals to God have played an important part in the life and work of the Congress. During the Revolution, the Continental Congress issued proclamations of National days of thanksgiving and of "humiliation, fasting, and prayer" at least twice a year throughout the war. Congress commissioned the first American Bible translation. To this day, we open every day with a prayer by the Chaplain. The House Chamber itself was used as a church from the year it was built until well after the Civil War. Thomas Jefferson, James Madison (the author of the First Amendment), and other presidents were regular attendees of services in the "Hall of the House."



## Congressional Declarations of Prayer and Fasting

During times of crisis, like the present War on Terrorism or the War for Independence, Congresses have frequently turned to God through their own prayers and by calling for national days of prayer and fasting. National days of Thanksgiving to God have evolved into a national holiday.

## "God Save the People"

This proclamation by Congress set May 17, 1776, as a "day of Humiliation, Fasting and Prayer" throughout the colonies. Congress urges its fellow citizens to "confess and bewail our manifold sins and transgressions, and by a sincere repentance and amendment of life, appease his [God's] righteous displeasure, and through the merits and mediation of Jesus Christ, obtain his pardon and forgiveness."

Massachusetts ordered a "suitable Number" of these proclamations be printed so "that each of the religious Assemblies in this Colony, may be furnished with a Copy of the same" and added the motto "God Save This People" as a substitute for "God Save the King."

—Library of Congress

## Church in the Hall of the House

Church services were held in what is now called Statuary Hall from 1807 to 1857. The first services in the Capitol, held when the government moved to Washington in the fall of 1800, were conducted in the "hall" of the House in the north wing of the building. In 1801 the House moved to temporary quarters in the south wing, called the "Oven," which it vacated in 1804, returning to the north wing for three years. Services were conducted in the House until well after the Civil War. The Speaker's podium was used as the preacher's pulpit.

—Library of Congress

## Thomas Jefferson's Reserved Seat

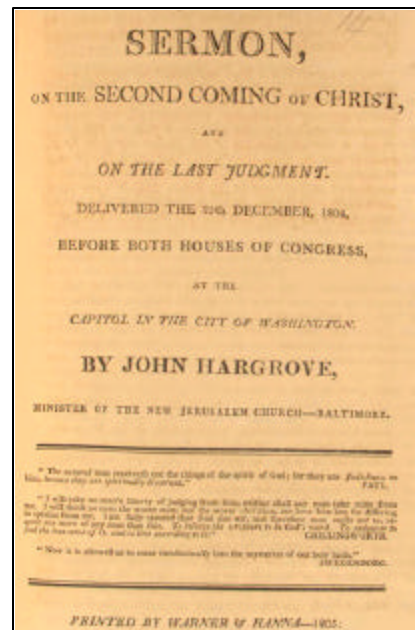
Early Washington insider Margaret Bayard Smith (1778-1844), a writer and social critic, wrote about Jefferson's attendance at church services in the House of Representatives: "Jefferson during his whole administration was a most regular attendant. The seat he chose the first day Sabbath, and the adjoining one, which his private secretary occupied, were ever afterwards by the courtesy of the congregation, left for him."

—Library of Congress

## First Catholic Sermon in the House

On January 8, 1826, Bishop John England (1786-1842) of Charleston, South Carolina, became the first Catholic clergyman to preach in the House of Representatives. The overflow audience included President John Quincy Adams.

—Library of Congress



## Acknowledging God in the Art of the Capitol

Much of the art in the Capitol was designed to demonstrate the faith Congress has in the Creator. The Rotunda, where today's services are being held, features several large murals of important events in American history. Two of them depict prayer meetings, one a Bible study, and another a baptism. In the mural that depicts Washington resigning his commission, he holds a copy of his Prayer for the States and the State Governors in his hand.

## Benjamin Franklin and the Wisdom of Prayer

At the Constitutional Convention in 1787, when the debates grew nearly intractable, wise old Ben Franklin shared this thought with his colleagues: "I have lived, Sir, a long time, and the longer I live, the more convincing proofs I see of this truth—that God governs in the affairs of men. And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without his notice, is it probable that an empire can rise without his aid? ... I also believe that without his concurring aid we shall succeed in this political building no better than the Builders of Babel."

# The Executive Branch

"I pray Heaven to bestow the best of blessings on this house and all that shall hereafter inhabit it. May none but honest and wise men ever rule under its roof."

John Adams, 1800





# Prayer in the Executive Branch

From George Washington to George W. Bush, Presidents have called on the American people to fast, pray, and offer thanks to God. In times of war, from the Revolution to the War on Terrorism, presidents have asked the people to humble themselves before God and seek his intervention. Conversely, even during the greatest crisis in American history, Abraham Lincoln found time to count the many blessings God had given America and urged all Americans to offer their thanks to Him. At his first inaugural, Dwight Eisenhower asked the crowd to join him in prayer before he delivered his address. The buildings of the Executive Branch, just like the Capitol, have been used for religious services.

## Washington's Farewell Address

When George Washington left office, he gave a famous Farewell Address, in which he gave the best advice he could to the new nation. He said, "Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports. ... And let us with caution indulge the supposition that morality can be maintained without religion. Whatever may be conceded to the influence of refined education on minds of peculiar structure, reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle."



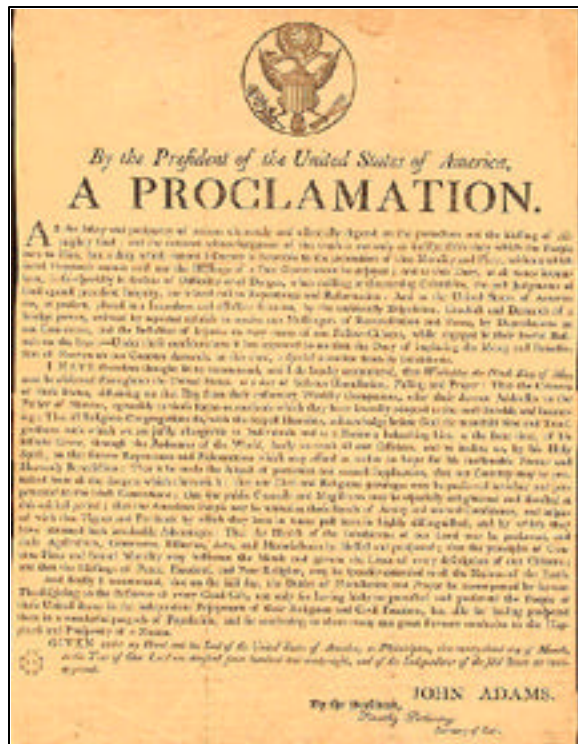
## "To Bigotry no Sanction"

President George Washington and a group of public officials, including Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson, left New York City, the temporary capital of the United States, on August 15, 1790, for a brief tour of Rhode Island. At Newport, Washington received an address of congratulations from the congregation of the Touro Synagogue. He answered, assuring his fellow citizens "of the Stock of Abraham" that the new American republic would give "to bigotry no sanction, to persecution not assistance."

## John Adams Fast Day Proclamation

John Adams continued the practice, begun in 1775 and adopted under the new federal

government by Washington, of issuing fast and thanksgiving day proclamations. In this proclamation, issued at a time when the nation appeared to be on the brink of a war with



France, Adams urged the citizens to "acknowledge before God the manifold sins and transgressions with which we are justly chargeable as individuals and as a nation; beseeching him at the same time, of His infinite grace, through the Redeemer of the World, freely to remit all our offences, and to incline us, by His Holy Spirit, to that sincere repentance and reformation which may afford us reason to hope for his inestimable favor and heavenly benediction."

—Library of Congress

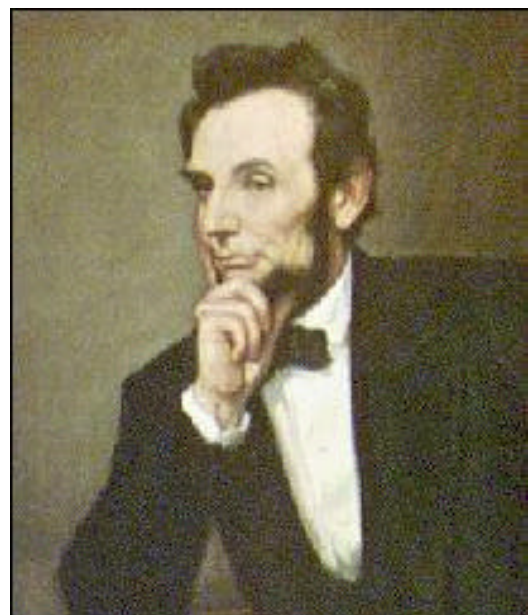
## Four-Hour Communion Service at the Treasury

Mannaseh Cutler, a Congressman from Massachusetts, described a communion service he attended on December 23, 1804 in

his diary: "Attended worship at the Treasury. Mr. Laurie alone. Sacrament. Full assembly. Three tables; service very solemn; nearly four hours."

## Lincoln's Thanksgiving Proclamation

During Lincoln's presidency, he frequently called for days of prayer. On one occasion, he shut down the federal government for a day so that federal employees could spend the day giving thanks to God. In 1863, he issued his famous Thanksgiving Day Proclamation. This has become a national tradition. After counting the blessings God had bestowed on America even during war, Lincoln said: "I do therefore invite my fellow citizens ... to set apart and observe the last Thursday of November next, as a day of Thanksgiving and Praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the Heavens. And I recommend to them that while offering up the ascriptions justly due to Him for such singular deliverances and blessings, they do also, with humble penitence for our national perverseness and disobedience, commend to His tender care all those who have become widows, orphans, mourners or sufferers in the lamentable civil strife in which we are unavoidably engaged, and fervently



implore the interposition of the Almighty Hand to heal the wounds of the nation and to restore it as soon as may be consistent with the Divine purposes to the full enjoyment of peace, harmony, tranquillity and Union.”

### **Teddy Roosevelt Urges Prayer After McKinley is Shot**

On September 14, 1901, after the assassination of President William McKinley, his Vice President (the new president) Teddy Roosevelt called for a national day of prayer and submission to God. He said, “I earnestly recommend all the people to assemble on that day in their respective places of divine worship, there to bow down in submission to the will of almighty God, and to pay out of full hearts the homage of love and reverence to the memory of the great and good President, whose death has sorely smitten the nation.”

### **Truman calls for Prayer on V.E. Day**

Thinking unrestrained celebrations would be inappropriate, Harry Truman called on the nation to pray instead, on the day Nazi Germany was finally defeated. Japan, of course,

#### **Truman Avoided Term “V-E Day”**

WASHINGTON, May 8.—(AP)—In announcing victory in Europe, President Truman today carefully avoided any use of the popular term “V-E Day” and White House sources later made it clear that for the United States no formal V-E Day was proclaimed.

Instead the President — in keeping with his announced wish that the European victory should not be made the occasion for unrestrained celebration—set aside next Sunday as “a day of prayer.” This will be May 13, Mothers’ Day.

Mr. Truman called upon the people on that day “whatever their faith, to unite in offering joyful thanks to God for the victory we have won and to pray that he will support us to the end of our present struggle and guide us into the way of peace.”

remained undefeated. He called on the people to “unite in offering joyful thanks to God for the victory we have won and to pray that he will support us to the end of our present struggle and guide us into the way of peace.”

### **Eisenhower’s First Action is Prayer**

Immediately after taking the oath of office, but before giving his inaugural address, Dwight Eisenhower asked the assembled to bow as he prayed: “Almighty God, as we stand here at this moment my future associates in the executive branch of government join me in beseeching that Thou will make full and complete our dedication to the service of the people in this throng, and their fellow citizens everywhere. Give us, we pray, the power to discern clearly right from wrong, and allow all our words and actions to be governed thereby, and by the laws of this

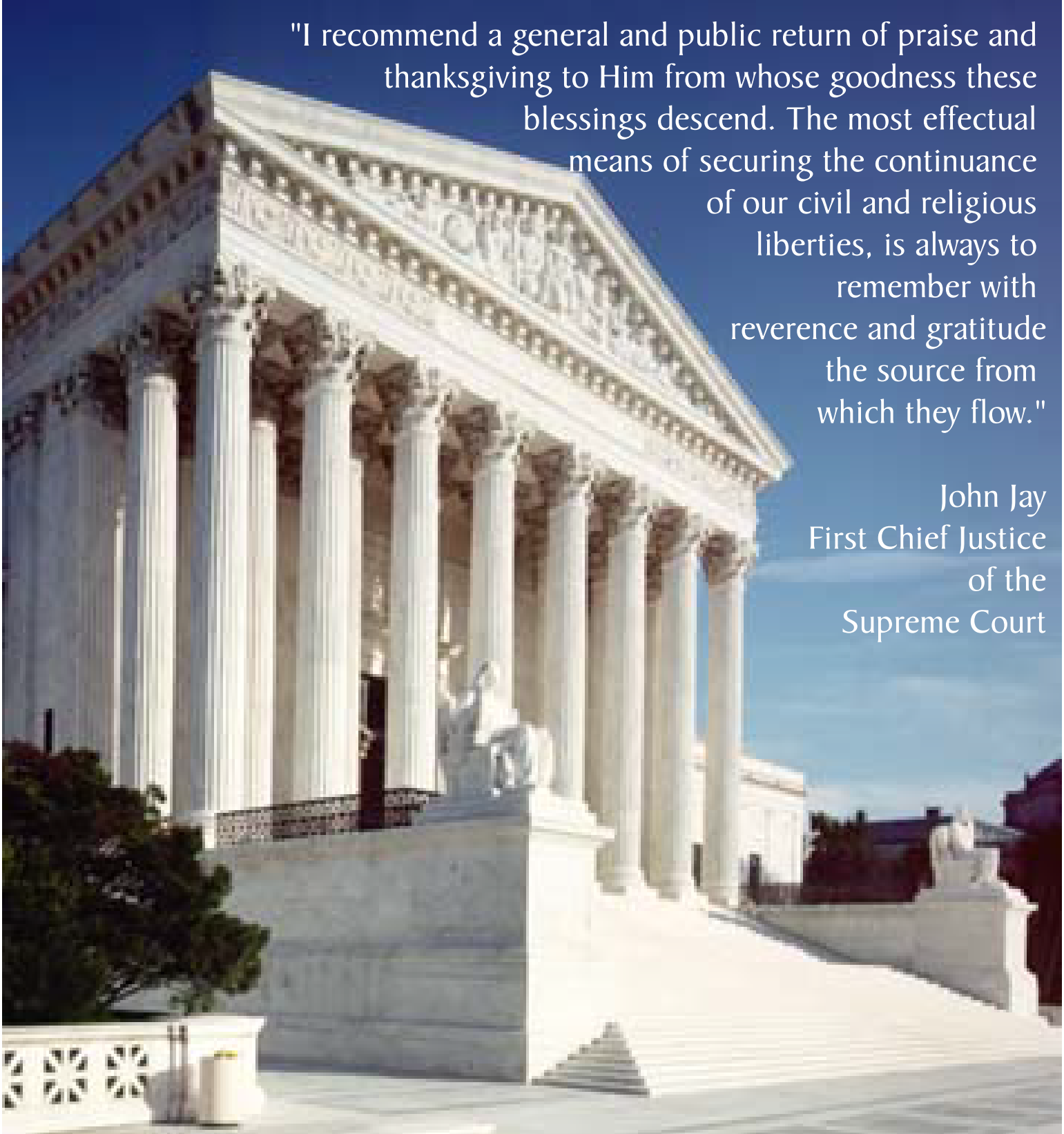
land. Especially we pray that our concern shall be for all the people regardless of station, race, or calling. May cooperation be permitted and be the mutual aim of those who, under the concepts of our Constitution, hold to differing political faiths; so that all may work for the good of our beloved country and Thy glory. Amen.”

### **Bush Calls on Congress to Prayer During War on Terrorism**

During his now-famous September 20 speech to Congress on terrorism, President George W. Bush called on Congress to pray: “Please continue praying for the victims of terror and their families, for those in uniform, and for our great country. Prayer has comforted us in sorrow, and will help strengthen us for the journey ahead.”



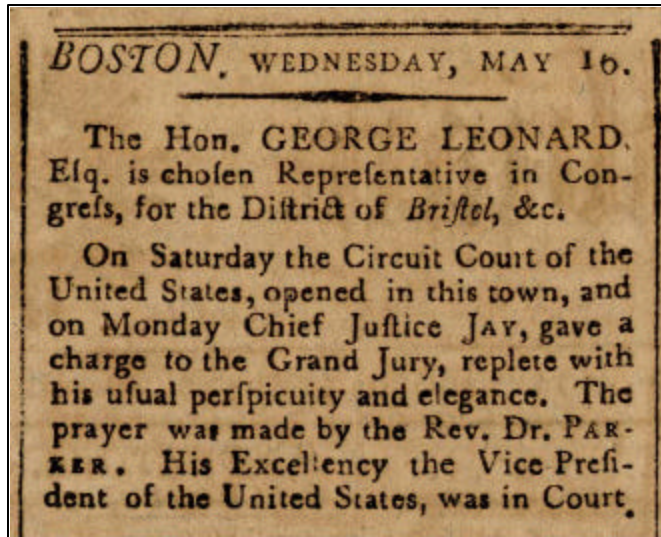
# The Judicial Branch

A photograph of the United States Supreme Court Building, showing its iconic neoclassical architecture with a series of tall white columns and a wide set of steps leading up to the entrance. The sky is clear and blue.

"I recommend a general and public return of praise and thanksgiving to Him from whose goodness these blessings descend. The most effectual means of securing the continuance of our civil and religious liberties, is always to remember with reverence and gratitude the source from which they flow."

John Jay  
First Chief Justice  
of the  
Supreme Court

# Prayer in the Judicial Branch



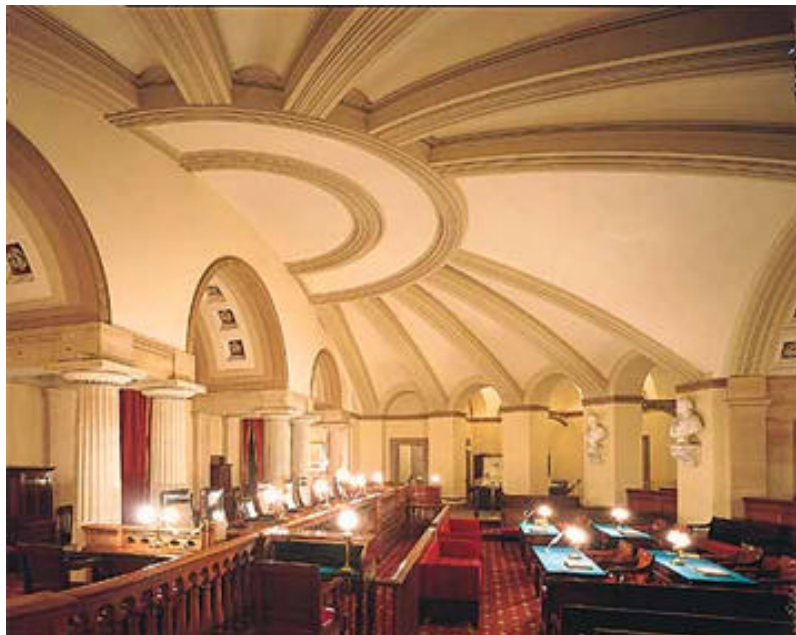
Prayer in the Judicial Branch of government is particularly interesting, because it is that branch that has created a “wall of separation” between church and state. There was no such separation until the Supreme Court ruled in 1947 that the founders had intended such a separation. They based that ruling on a letter (not a law) Thomas Jefferson had written to

the Danbury Baptist Association in 1802 in which he described a “wall of separation between church and state.” Two days after writing that letter, Jefferson began attending church in the House of Representatives.

## First Court Opens with Four -Hour Communion Service

The first session of the U.S. Supreme Court began with a four-hour long communion service. Prayer was common in early courtrooms. In fact, for much of its history, the Supreme Court opened with prayer each day much as Congress still does.

## Adams' Description of a Church Service in the Supreme Court



In 1806, future President John Quincy Adams attempted to attend a church service in the Supreme Court chamber, then on the ground floor of the Capitol: “I rode...to the Capitol for the purpose of attending church; but I found there was no preaching in the House of Representatives, and court-house below to which Rev. Laurie had resorted in its stead was so crowded that I could not get within the room.”

## **“This is a Religious Nation”**

In 1892, in the case of *Holy Trinity Church v. U.S.*, the Supreme Court declared “this is a religious nation” and specifically interpreted the Establishment and Free Expression clauses as evidence of America’s pervasive faith: “If we examine the constitutions of the various states, we find in them a constant recognition of religious obligations. ...Even the constitution of the United States, which is supposed to have little touch upon the private life of the individual, contains in the first amendment a declaration common to the constitutions of all the states, as follows: ‘Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,’ etc., - and also provides in article 1, § 7, (a provision common to many constitutions,) that the executive shall have 10 days (Sundays excepted) within which to determine whether he will approve or veto a bill. There is no dissonance in these declarations. There is a universal language pervading them all, having one meaning. They affirm and reaffirm that this is a religious nation. These are not individual sayings, declarations of private persons. They are organic utterances. They speak the voice of the entire people.”